Research Brief

**Shared Goals for Learning—
Is Everyone Using the Same
Roadmap?**

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Shared Goals for Learning—Is Everyone Using the Same Roadmap?

> *A shared vision connects people in the school community*
> *around a common idea. A strong, shared vision actually*
> *helps us focus our attention on the possibilities and*
> *potentials—not the problems and pitfalls. The vision lays the*
> *foundation block for the culture of the school; it has great*
> *power to energize and mobilize.*
>
> J. A. Walsh and B. D. Sattes
> *Inside School Improvement* (2000)

Schools can be marked by intense isolation among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between parents and teachers. Yet we know that in successful organizations, people feel connected to one another and to the work of the organization. An important characteristic of a successful school is that everyone in the school understands and agrees on what the school is trying to do. That is, they share common goals. A clear vision, expressed through specific goals and high expectations, guides action and contributes to improved student achievement (Cotton, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1990).

Sometimes, goals get lost in the rituals of schools: they are created and then largely forgotten. However, goals can become an important part of the fabric of the school when all activities are aimed at achieving them (Marks, Doane, & Secada, 1996). Successful schools begin by identifying and communicating a set of goals and then implementing those goals, actively seeking the support of key stakeholders (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). These key stakeholders include the faculty and staff of the school, as well as parents and community members. Shared goals can focus needs assessment activities, which then generate data that provide a solid base for informed

decisions about instructional issues (Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Kotter, 1990). In this way, goals prompt *and* sustain continuous improvement.

Schools can also get bogged down in their improvement efforts by having too many goals (e.g., adopting several programs simultaneously, which can result in teachers trying to do too many new things at once). Such improvement strategies are often marked by failure to build capacity and lack of a clear focus. Additionally, schools can be hindered by not having a clear sense of the distinct meanings of the terms *vision, mission,* and *goals,* as well as how each relates to the others.

> A *vision* means an image of what the school can and should become. It is deeply embedded in values, hopes, and dreams. A *mission statement* is more specific and often defines what the school is trying to accomplish. . . . *Goals and objectives* are still more specific . . . and can be used to focus change and improvement efforts. (Peterson, 1995, p. 2)

Without this basic understanding, schools run the risk of creating an improvement roadmap—which is based on a school's vision, mission, and goals—that has an uncertain destination.

Characteristics of a Good Goal Set

Few and easy to recall. A *few, easily remembered goals* are better than a long list of elaborately worded goal statements. Because people must often make immediate decisions during classroom instruction and faculty meetings, and as they evaluate learning activities, they are more likely to implement a few clearly worded goals than a long list. When workable goals become part of the internal culture of the school

community, all activities can be aimed at achieving them (Marks, Doane, & Secada, 1996).

Focus attention on priorities. Because there are only a few goals, they should be carefully crafted to focus attention on the aspects of the school that can be considered *priorities*. Goals that are too narrow (affecting only one or two grades or groups of students, for example) are unlikely to be seen as important by everyone. Likewise, goals that are too broad may be open to interpretations that are way off the mark. It may be helpful to think of the goals as the foundation on which all of the school's actions can rest and be supported.

Relate to standards. Goals should be *related to standards* (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). This is especially important, given current standards-based accountability systems. Goals based on the criteria by which the school will be judged make it easier for the school community to support the goals and to evaluate the degree to which the goals have been accomplished.

Drive action. Goals should be stated in such a way that they *drive action*. The goal statements should guide mundane decisions that may seem, at first glance, unrelated to school improvement—such as dress codes and faculty meeting agendas—as well as essential decisions about graduation requirements, scheduling of students and courses, instructional delivery, and so forth (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Apply data. Data can help schools establish goals and can be a useful tool for gauging their progress in meeting those goals. Citing the work of Hopkins and Ainscow (1993), Marzano (2003) writes: "Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of schools producing unprecedented gains in student achievement (particularly with students whose

backgrounds are not conducive to such gains), is that they rely on data to identify probable successful interventions" (p. 158). Schmoker (1996) suggests that data are to goals what signposts are to travelers: "Data are not end points, but are essential to reaching them—the signposts on the road to school improvement" (p. 36).

Shared Understanding of Goals

In schools that value shared leadership, a widespread understanding of important goals is crucial (O'Neill, 2000; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). This makes sense: if a number of individuals make important decisions, then the decision makers must share a common set of goals so they can act in concert. Research has repeatedly revealed that low-performing organizations struggle because members neither clearly understand the purpose(s) of the organization nor their own roles in helping the organization reach its goals (Senge, 1990).

Researchers from the Charles A. Dana Center (2001) studied five high-poverty Texas high schools that performed better than average on one or more of the state's indicators. They found five common practices that they deemed critical to the performance of the schools. Among them:

> Setting clear goals and establishing high expectations. School leaders set clear and measurable goals for student achievement. These goals were publicly expressed and shared with teachers, students, and parents. . . . Administrators and teachers shared the conviction that all students can be successful. . . . teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff at these schools continually demonstrated their belief that their students could learn—and their faculty could teach—the challenging curriculum. (p. 2)

Goals that are shared among school faculty and staff also help to articulate the specific vision of school improvement. School reform relies on defining and pursuing clear, measurable goals, as well as the benchmarks for achieving these goals (Hansel, 2001; Schmoker, 1996). For example, implementation of instruction should be monitored by measuring small successes that advance those articulated goals (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; WestEd, 2000). When selecting strategies for continuous school improvement, a number of specific actions will be identified. As these actions are taken, all members of the school community should be able to understand how each action contributes to attaining the goals. Progress toward the goals will help to generate a spirit of collaboration and sustain willingness to support the school goals (Housman & Martinez, 2001).

Writing about their school improvement research in Chicago, Newmann and colleagues affirm: "Research has documented the importance of school organizational factors such as a unity of purpose, a clear focus, and shared values for student learning" (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001, p. 10). They also point to evidence of the benefits of shared goals in the school effectiveness research, which refers to "a set of key factors that can lead to higher school performance. These factors include the importance of a sustained organizational focus [and] staff agreement on clear and specific goals" (p. 17). Their discussion of the implications for education leaders suggests that "school principals should focus their improvement plans, professional development, and acquisition of instructional materials on a few core educational goals pursued through a common instruction framework" (pp. 42-43).

The impact of shared goals should be observable. When analyzing the performance of the school over the past year, school staff should try to identify how the goals were translated into actions that led to

improvements. If some goals have been achieved, they can be replaced by others that represent future opportunities. The goals should be specific enough to sustain a coherent focus over time and to encourage the development of additional goals related to the school's mission (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). The process of articulating goals never ends. As new challenges arise, new goals will be needed.

Summary

Common goals help teachers, students, parents, and community members focus their actions so that they translate into desirable results. Ideally, goals should be realistic, clearly stated, measurable, and widely understood and supported. Goals, then, can be thought of as destinations, not road maps. However, if we know where we are going, then planning the trip becomes much easier. Well-articulated goals that are widely supported increase the likelihood that everyone will reach the destination together.

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